Current
Policy No. 429

Population Growth and the Policy of Nations

October 5, 1982

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Following is an address by Richard Elliot Benedick, Coordinator of Population Affairs, before the Bangladesh Institute of Strategic Studies, Dacca, Bangladesh, October 5, 1982.

When future historians take stock of this century, perhaps no event will stand out as vividly as the unprecedented expansion in the number of people on this Earth. I would like today to examine the dimensions of this phenomenon and to indicate some policy implications for the international community.

It is now generally established that the annual growth rate of world population peaked at approximately 2% in the 1960s and, since then, has begun a perceptible decline, an event which has elicited—perhaps premature—sighs of relief from some quarters. According to U.N. estimates, the population growth rate currently stands at about 1.7% annually—a rate which, at first glance, may not appear alarming in a world accustomed to double-digit inflation, 20% interest rates, and tripling of oil prices.

But the power of compound interest is awesome, especially when the base numbers involved are so huge. Consider this:

- In the first quarter of the 20th century, population growth, at 0.8% annually, resulted in a total net addition of 360 million to the world's population;
- By the third quarter, 1950–75, the average annual growth was 1.9%, and 1.5 billion people were added during these 25 years.
- For the last quarter of our century, we project a continuing drop in the growth rate to 1.5% by century's end. Yet, despite this growth rate decline, the addition to the world's population in these 25 years will rise to 2.2 billion.

Demographers agree that between now and the end of this century—less than 20 years away—the world's population, barring unforeseen catastrophe, will probably increase from about 4.5 billion to over 6 billion—an increment which approximates the total population of the world as recently as 1930. This is equivalent to adding 20 new countries of the size of Bangladesh, and 90% of this population growth will occur in the world's low-income countries.

In the industrialized countries, women currently bear, on the average, two children during their lifetime; at which rate a population replaces itself, without further growth. In the Third World, in contrast, the average number of children per family is much larger, and 40%–45% of the total population is under 15 years of age, i.e., not yet even in their reproductive years. Even if tomorrow's parents have fewer children than the current generation, their sheer numbers are so great that it will take many decades before a given country's population ceases to increase.

Let us take India as an example. Its population has grown from approximately 250 million in 1920 to about 700 million at present. But this is only the

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beginning. Indian women currently bear, on the average, approximately five children during their lifetime. Even if this number were to decline within the next 20 years to an average of a little over two children per woman, the population of India would nevertheless continue to grow over the following decades and would not level off until it reached about 1.4 billion around the middle of the next century.

Moreover, if the two-child norm were not reached until 2020, the eventual population would reach almost 1.9 billion. Where India's eventual population will fall within this 1.4–1.9 billion range will depend on the date at which the average of two children per woman is reached. The only factors, other than fertility reduction, which could influence the eventual size of India's population would be an unforeseen increase in emigration to other countries or an unfortunate rise in mortality.

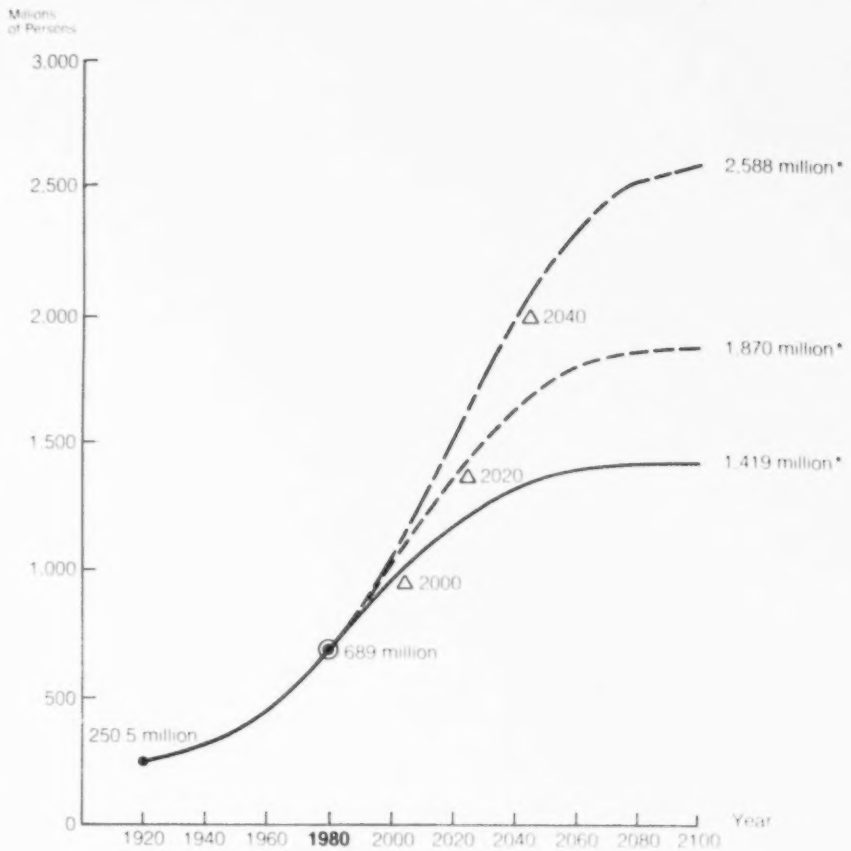
I would like to emphasize that the number two represents an average—it is understood that many women, many families, would have more than two children. Nor am I recommending a two-child average family size. I am merely pointing out a mathematical verity, i.e., what would happen if the average were reduced from five children per family to two within a certain time.

This phenomenon of demographic momentum, which is not generally well understood by policymakers, nevertheless has profound implications for policy. For all but a handful of less developed countries are a long way from replacement-level fertility. African women, for example, currently bear on average more than six children over their reproductive lifetime; those in South Asia more than five.

Because millions more people are entering their reproductive years in the coming decades than are leaving, family planning information and services need to reach ever-larger numbers of families just to stay even in terms of population growth. This explains the shock experienced last summer by India's leaders, when a census revealed that, despite a 10% drop in the birth rate during the 1970s, India's population growth rate was still as high as in the 1960s—nearly 2.5% annually, at which rate India's population would double in only three decades.

The difficulty in reaching a replacement level of fertility may also be gauged from the fact that the experience of many countries has shown that the two-child average norm is not reached until about 70%–80% of a country's married couples in reproductive ages practice family planning; in the Third World (excluding China) the 1976 average was less than 20%; for many countries in the Near East and Africa, it is under 5%.

Demographic Momentum: Alternative Paths of India's Population Growth



Δ Year replacement level fertility is reached.
After replacement-level fertility is reached a population continues to expand for several decades but eventually stops growing. Replacement-level fertility usually equals a little over two children per woman. Based on 1975–80 data, Indian women are currently bearing, on the average, 5.1 children per woman.

* Population size at stabilization.

Source: Tomas Frejka, The Population Council

What are some consequences for the modern world of these new demographic realities? In recent years, we find that much of the economic gains and increased food output of the Third World were canceled out by the steady rise in population. During the 1960–80 period, the per capita income gap between North and South widened, despite substantial overall economic growth in the South. The crucial factor was the difference in population growth over this period: under 200 million in the North, versus 1.2 billion in the South. Taking account of the demographic momentum principle discussed earlier, some economists conclude that, during the next

20-year period, 1980–2000, a further widening of the North-South income gap is highly probable.

Almost 700 million additional people will be seeking jobs in the Third World between now and the end of the century; these people are already born and exceed the entire current labor force of the industrialized countries. Many of the prospective unemployed will move to already overcrowded slums, contributing to a virtual urban explosion. According to U.N. projections, this phenomenon may bring Mexico City and Sao Paolo to a population of 26–30 million by the year 2000; Tehran, Cairo, and Karachi to the 14–16 million range; and turn a large number of urban areas from small towns to megacities within a relatively short time span—for example, Baghdad and Lima from 600,000 in 1950 to 11–12 million in 2000, Kinshasa and Lagos from 200–300,000 to over 9 million.

World Health Organization studies indicate that the health of both women and children is undermined by pregnancies during teenage and late in life by close spacing of children and by high orders of birth. It has been estimated that, for every five births in the world today, there are probably two induced abortions. The consequences of pregnancy and abortion of unwanted children are a major cause of death and disability among young women in many developing countries, especially where family planning is unavailable. Data from Latin America indicate that abortion declines after family planning programs are introduced, providing women with alternative means of spacing children and limiting fertility.

Demographic growth will also interact with, and complicate, such global problems as inflation; higher priced energy; and the environment, including water pollution, soil erosion, and deforestation. On balance, these developments seem to point to a potential for social unrest, political instability, urban crime, and mass migration, which must concern the international community. It is clear that most developing countries will at least double their current population level within the next two to three decades. It is also clear that there is a distinct urgency in undertaking greater efforts now to reduce fertility, in order to avoid a tripling, or worse.

In certain academic circles, it is fashionable to postulate theoretically unlimited resources in the long run, which might imply that the population problem is irrelevant. While we are confident in the ingenuity of mankind to continue technological advances, there is, nevertheless, a growing international consensus that the cumulative effects of some 30 years of extremely rapid population growth cannot be ignored, in either short-term or long-term strategies for development. It is also becoming more evident that past demographic experiences of Western countries are a poor guide for the currently modernizing economies. Because of the unprecedented demographic momentum factor discussed earlier, many developing countries simply cannot depend on general economic development alone to moderate population growth to sustainable levels at a decent standard of life.

Many world leaders recognize this situation. Chinese Vice Premier Chen Muhua wrote in 1979 that, "We must squarely face the fact that rapid population increase obstructs economic development." Indira Gandhi, in reiterating India's "total commitment to voluntary family planning," stated in 1981 that, "We cannot afford to wait for social and economic changes to bring about an appropriate motivational environment in which a small family norm becomes the rule." President Suharto of Indonesia—the third largest developing country—stated in 1981 that, "Successful implementation of family planning programs will be a key to the survival of the world." And President Mubarak of Egypt announced this year: "We cannot ignore the fact that the current rate of increase in population will hinder our efforts to achieve development, will dissipate our hopes for changing the quality of life of every Egyptian and confine our ambitions to preventing the deterioration and aggravation of our situation."

Similar statements have come within this past year from such varied sources as the King of Nepal; the Heads of State of Burundi, Cameroon, and Tanzania; the annual reports of the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank; Vice President Kibaki of Kenya; President Marcos of the Philippines; the U.N. Economic and Social Council; the Director General of the OPEC Fund; and the Paris Conference on Least Developed Countries.

Unfortunately, however, rhetoric has not always been followed by commensurate action. Only 2% of donors' development assistance goes into population-related programs. In the Third World, very few countries devote more than 1% of their national budgets to population or family planning efforts, and these are often marginal activities buried in the health ministry. Even though at least 35 countries have an official policy to reduce the growth of population, it is estimated that over one-half, and perhaps as many as two-thirds, of married couples in the Third World (outside of China) still lack knowledge of, or access to, modern methods of controlling fertility.

On the positive side, it is significant that declines in traditionally high fertility levels have occurred in a number of countries which are strikingly different in terms of religious, cultural, and political systems. Moreover, evidence from Indonesia, Colombia, Thailand, China, Kerala State in India, and Sri Lanka indicates that even relatively poor and predominantly rural people can change their fertility behavior within a short time frame—contradicting the theory that modernization must precede smaller family size.

It thus seems clear that demographic trends can be responsive to public policy. Nevertheless, the fertility reductions which were achieved during the 1970s may represent the relatively easy phase—reaching primarily city dwellers and the better educated classes. Bringing fertility down further will involve much more intensive, and expensive, efforts in terms of education, motivation, and extension of services throughout the countryside. The sheer logistical difficulties in reaching tens of thousands of rural villages with information, commodities, and followup and in training adequate numbers of paramedical personnel should not be underestimated. Programs are also affected by inefficient administration and absence of commitment in the bureaucracy, and by opposition or indifference to family planning by the medical profession.

Finally, the role of science cannot be ignored. Additional funds are urgently needed for biomedical research and development of better and safer methods of family planning, as well as for solutions to problems of infertility, a condition which also brings anguish to many families worldwide.

A word of conclusion: Despite a natural tendency to focus on the almost overwhelming numerical aspects of population growth, we must not allow ourselves to lose sight of the fundamental objective of all population policies: a betterment of the human condition and an improvement in the quality of life for individuals, for mothers and children, for families. Family planning programs should be integrated within an overall development effort, should be linked with measures to reduce child mortality, and should be consistent with principles of voluntarism, free choice by families, and concern for human dignity and spiritual values. Improvements in the role, status, and education of women are of particular importance to the development process and to reduce population growth.

The situation I have just described is certainly serious, but it is not hopeless. The solutions to these problems will depend on the attention and resources which the population issue can command, now and over the next few years, from Third World governments, foreign aid donors, international agencies, and the scientific community. I am hopeful that we of this generation will meet this responsibility to the generations that will follow us. ■

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